

JUN 20 2008

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EPA tells Libby future

Special to the Inter Lake

LIBBY — Future funding will be sufficient to continue cleanup operations in Libby, a high-ranking Environmental Protection Agency official told the Community Advisory Group last week.

"Libby is among our very highest-priority sites," said Mike Cook, director of the EPA's Office of Emergency and Immediate Response, which manages the Superfund program.

Introducing Cook, local EPA project manager Jim Christiansen described him as "the highest nonpolitical person in the Superfund chain."

The Superfund program is facing unprecedented demands on its budget, Cook said. Many sites are being split into pieces, with the highest priority being given to parts of the site where people are being exposed to hazardous materials.

Lower priorities are given to places where there is a low risk of exposure or where the primary concern is ecological rather than public health.

With the exception of individual residences containing asbestos-contaminated vermiculite insulation or where vermiculite is present in lawns or gardens, the most significant sources of exposure in the Libby area have been dealt with, Cook said.

The EPA's focus is now on residential properties with a target of 250 to 300 cleanups per year.

President Bush has asked Congress for a budget increase for Superfund next year, Cook said.

"We're very hopeful that we'll be able to get that," he said.

The budget for the Libby cleanup was \$17.6 million for this year. If a nationwide increase in the Superfund budget is approved, the work in Libby should continue on schedule, Cook said.

Around 80 homes have been cleaned since last year.

"I don't know that we'll hit 250 or 300 this year," Christiansen said. "This is our first year. Two hundred fifty is kind of our

goal."

In other business at the meeting:

■ Christiansen reviewed the situation at the Stimson Lumber property in Libby.

Tests showed the highest levels of potential exposure — similar to that seen in some houses in Libby — is in the central maintenance building, where vermiculite was used as insulation. Estimates are that the building could be cleaned or demolished for about the same cost. The choice would lie with the property owner. If the building were to be demolished, a replacement would not be part of the package.

"The cost of putting up a new building would basically double

funding adequate

or triple the cost," Christiansen said.

The plywood plant does not contain vermiculite insulation, and tests showed low levels of asbestos contamination. The cleanup there would be relatively simple and cheap, Christiansen said.

Acknowledging that the country's new port authority is negotiating with Stimson to take over the mill site for economic development purposes, Christiansen said the EPA will "bend over backwards" to do what it can to help the local economy.

■ Andrij Holian and Jean Pfau of the Center for Environmental Health Sciences at the University of Montana provided an update on their research into

asbestos-related disease.

Studies, using both people and mice, are ongoing to find genetic links to asbestos-related disease along with links between asbestos exposure and diseases such as lupus, multiple sclerosis and rheumatoid arthritis.

Preliminary tests have shown the type of asbestos in vermiculite mined near Libby is much more likely to produce disease and to turn on the body's immune response.

Holian expressed support for a proposal to build a center in Libby for clinical research as well as treatment. The Libby center could provide samples for the Missoula lab, which could continue to focus on basic research, Holian said.